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ABSTRACT

The idea of accountability has by now been interpreted in ways which are different enough from one another to have permitted a certain ambiguity to creep into the notion in its present use within the educational community. The principal purpose of this report is, therefore, to try to set forth some clearer statement of what the idea of accountability means. Accountability must be construed as a two-way relationship between and among all participants at all levels of the educational process. This approach makes unnecessary the tendency to use accountability as a way of pointing a punishing finger at someone, particularly at teachers. This way of understanding accountability could mean a new sense of democratic relationships throughout the entire chain of administration-faculty-pupil-parents. It is essential that educators develop scientifically acceptable standards for judging educational performance. (Author/JF)

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From time to time, the Cooperative Accountability Project (CAP) will issue *CAP Commentary* as a means of sharing various points of view on educational accountability. By abstracting and quoting the opinions of concerned individuals, ready reference may be provided to the expanding interpretation and implementation of the accountability concept.

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ACCOUNTABILITY: A RATIONALE

by

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Chairman, Select Subcommittee on Education

(The following comments are taken from a speech delivered by Congressman Brademas on March 23, 1973, at a symposium on accountability in education sponsored by the Department of Foundations of Education, College of Education, Memphis State University. The full text of the speech was entered into the Congressional Record of December 10, 1973.)

When Leon Lessinger began to use the word "accountability" some three years ago, he was proposing a method of trying to insure what he called three basic rights in education. The first right was the child's; the second, the taxpayer's; and the third, the school's. The child's right, said Dr. Lessinger, was "to be taught what he needs to know" in order to be a productive and satisfied member of our society; the taxpayer's right, to be informed of the educational results produced by specific expenditures; and the right of the school, finally, was to draw on all the resources of the society instead of being restricted to what he called "educators' overburdened resources."

PURPOSE AND METHOD

As we all know, the method he championed for achieving the goal of "*guaranteed* acquisition of basic skills by *all* our children" (the emphasis is his) was "an independent educational audit of educational results."

For Dr. Lessinger, that meant the process of what he called "educational engineering." Discussions of accountability turned quickly, therefore, into discussions of performance contracting, external audits, program planning and budget systems, and voucher plans. So what these methods were supposed to *achieve*, accountability, got shunted to one side, and educators focused attention on the methods themselves.

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I do not intend to try to compare these methods and tell you of which I approve and which I don't; I cite them chiefly because the proponents of accountability, as well as those who have apprehensions about it, center their concern on methods. I want instead to suggest to you that it may be possible to approve of the purposes of accountability without necessarily approving--or disapproving--of particular methods for achieving them. Yet the idea of accountability has by now been interpreted in ways which are different enough from one another to have permitted a certain unclarity to creep into the notion in its present use within the educational community. My principal purpose here will therefore be to try to set forth some clearer statement of what the idea of accountability means.

ACCOUNTABILITY--A "RELATIONAL" TERM

Let me begin by saying something about the logical characteristics of the term "accountability" itself. First, accountability is what logicians call a "relational" term, not a simple "property" term. The distinction can best be brought out by example. "Female" is a property term. "Sister" is a relational term. A person can be called female simply by possessing certain physiological characterictics, independently of whether anyone else possesses them. But a person cannot be called "sister" except in relation to other persons. To say that a person is a sister is to say, first, that she is female, but second, that she has one or more brothers or sisters and also that those persons all share the same parents. In other words, "sister" is shorthand for "sister-of and daughter-to" certain other persons. Just so, to be accountable is not a simple property only certain persons have independently of whether other persons possess it. To be accountable is to be accountable-to someone or some others. It is also to be accountable-to some task or purpose.

ACCOUNTABLE TO WHOM, FOR WHAT?

But we have only begun. None of this analysis yet tells us who is to be accountable or who has the right to hold those persons accountable. All we can say so far is that the mere analysis of the idea does not let us conclude definitively that only teachers, say, can be considered accountable. Of course I have in mind here the objections which teachers and teachers' unions have quite properly made to the concept of accountability in some of its versions. For if the concept of accountability is to be made part of the everyday workings of public education, we shall need the teachers on our side, and we also will need many other kinds of people as well.

So far, we have a formula, with three blanks in it: X is accountable to Y for doing Z. Now, of course, as you know, the blanks in that formula have been filled in certain ways for a very long time. Here is one familiar way:

Pupils are accountable to *teachers* for doing *homework* (passing test, etc.). Here is another: *Teachers* are accountable to *principals* for (and here we spell out whatever obligations are detailed in a signed contract). And to continue: *Principals* are accountable to *superintendents* for (and here we spell out whatever is involved in managing a given public school).

We might go on a level or two higher: *Superintendents* are accountable to boards of education for (and here we spell out the obligations involved in keeping a given school district functioning). We might go so far as to say: *Boards of education* are accountable to *taxpayers* (perhaps for making wise use of funds allocated for the education budget of a given community). In larger communities, there are, of course, levels interspersed between the levels I have mentioned. And yet in general the pattern is familiar enough to enable us to agree that this is how things have been up till now.

A TWO-WAY RELATIONSHIP

Let me then point out one important assumption about this way of filling in the blanks. At each level, the pattern assumes that accountability is a one-way relation. The pattern says that a pupil is accountable to the teacher, but it does not say that the teacher is accountable to the pupil. It says that the teacher is accountable to the principal, but it does not say that the principal is accountable to the teacher. And so on. In other words, the assumption is that it is perfectly proper for there to be a hierarchy of accountability, with persons at lower levels being accountable to persons at next higher levels. But I want to suggest to you that this is not a democratic way of doing things. If we want to say that teachers are accountable-to-someone, it seems only fair to have someone accountable-to-teachers. But that is all part of the idea that accountability can be traced throughout a one-way hierarchy. For in this view, no one is accountable to pupils.

So let us explore the idea of accountability as a two-way relationship. If a pupil is accountable to a teacher, it seems only fair that a teacher might also be accountable to his or her pupils. If pupils submit to being examined on what they are taught, perhaps they have a right to say something about what they want to learn. Everyone knows that when someone wants to learn something, the learning absorbs the person's *full* attention; he learns well and quickly (because he wants to for some purpose of his own). Then why don't we take advantage of this truism by using it in public education? Since we adults insist that children learn how to read, why can't we let children tell us what they want to read about? If the skill itself stands in the way of what it is that interests them, they will deal with the skill as a necessary step on the way to a goal of their own choosing.

We gain willing students by working with, rather than against, the grain of the child. But we gain something else as well. We are teaching the child at a very young age that he or she bears a good part of the responsibility for his or her education. Here again, we make use of a truism about learning: if we want someone to learn something--to learn how to do something or be something, as distinguished from learning only some isolated fact--we put the person in a situation in which he can do or be that thing.

So if we want, as an end product of our educational process, an independent person who is capable of and interested in continuing to learn long after he or she leaves our educational system, then we begin as *early* as we can to teach children how to be independent and responsible. A teacher who seriously discusses with a pupil what the pupil's interests are is really telling the pupil something very important: the teacher is saying that he

or she respects the child's individuality, takes the child seriously and, finally, is interested in the child.

All of us in our nonprofessional moments know these things. We have only to put them to work for us in our public education system. Indeed, we're learning them in our professional moments as well. A study entitled, "Educational Accountability and Evaluation," written last year by Sheila Krystal and Samuel Henrie, points out that, although performance contracts have resulted in only very small improvements in reading and mathematics skills, one of the interesting side effects of this and other approaches to accountability is that students have been found to respond well to the added interest in their learning and welfare.

AUTHORITY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

One consequence of considering accountability as a *two-way* relationship is that old patterns or old lines of authority may well fall away fairly soon. For the two-way relationship between teacher and pupil can be replicated at every stage of what has been, up till now, believed to be a one-way hierarchy. If a teacher is accountable to her principal for teaching certain things to a certain number of pupils for a certain number of hours per day and days per year, so the principal is accountable to the teacher for the environment in which teaching is to take place. For here, when the authority goes not just in one direction, but makes a round trip, so to speak, what we're really emphasizing is that the teacher has a right to be a partner to settling the terms of those things he is going to be held accountable for.

PARENTS A VITAL LINK

Just so, when the line of authority points back to the superintendent from the principal, as well as going in the other familiar direction, new topics will be laid open for discussion as well as new attitudes in discussing them. So that by the time we reach the line of authority that runs from the school board to the parent, we can expect that there will be an equally important line from the parent to the school board. Indeed, parents are the link that can turn this whole series of two-way relationships into a circle, instead of parents being merely one end of the former series of one-way relationships that was, in effect, an authoritarian hierarchy where those at lower levels had no means of questioning those at higher levels.

Parents complete the chain by having the power to vote a school board in or out, on one end, and by watching and assisting the growth of their own children, at the other end. Many parents do both these things now, of course. But the two-way relationship patterns could invite many new participants into the whole educational process by letting parents see that they have no right to demand certain results from their children's teachers unless they themselves are willing to share part of the responsibility with the teacher. In the two-way view of the relationship, when the parent goes to the teacher to say: "You're being paid to teach, but my Johnny can't read," the teacher will be able to point out that certain factors beyond her control, but perhaps within the parent's control, may well be standing in Johnny's way.

This view of accountability--a two-way relationship between and among all participants at all levels of the educational process--helps correct one of the unspoken misconceptions that accountability is the weapon we've long been seeking to punish the teachers who can't make our children learn. This punitive interpretation of accountability is, of course, what the teachers' unions are responding to when they resist accountability in many of its forms.

ACCOUNTABILITY AS A SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT PROGRAM

New York City is therefore to be applauded for having required that scapegoating be no part of the accountability plan it bought from the Educational Testing Service. The theme of that plan is to offer a tool for pinpointing schools and school districts that are doing a good job; it does not design techniques for indicating individual principals and teachers who are *not* doing a good job. In a word, the accountability apparatus designed by ETS works for corrective action for schools. It is a school improvement program. What is still not clear is whether the plan tells anyone who is responsible to whom and for what.

The *New York Times* of March 18, 1973, printed the results of part of Stage 1 of the [New York City] plan: a full page listed student reading achievement scores in Grades 2 and 5 in every school in every district in the city. Stage 2 will be to assess the causes of poor achievement. Stage 3 will be to offer methods of taking corrective action to remove deficiencies in performance.

The heart of the problem is, of course, assessing the causes of poor achievement. What corrective action is to be taken will, in turn, depend on what the causes turn out to be. One important aspect of the New York scheme is to make the corrective action plans a matter of public record so that they can be opened to public discussion. The ETS report warns, however, that goals still have to be clarified, standards set, and measurement techniques improved. But these are familiar problems for educators. The point is, how does calling them problems of "accountability" help educators solve them?

Here is one way. It was perhaps the impetus of the idea of accountability itself that caused the New York City Board of Education to try to think more carefully about goals it might reasonably try to meet, within the limits of a contemporary situation the pressures of which you all know well. To the extent, then, that accountability serves as an incentive to all of us to sharpen our ideas about specific goals we want our public school system to accomplish, it serves a useful purpose, both intellectual and practical.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

Now let's go back one more time to the concept of accountability construed as a two-way relationship. Accountability, so defined, means that I am most fairly accountable to you when I help decide what things I shall be accountable for, as well as how my performance of those things is to be judged. For I find it difficult to understand how anyone can expect me to agree to perform certain tasks which are not within my power. I cannot agree that I will teach Johnny and Susan to read at grade level by the end

of the year, in advance of knowing Johnny and Susan.... If, on the other hand, I know these children well, and know them to be intelligent enough to do the work, but also know that they are distracted by home situations of poverty or parental bickering or brutality, then again I cannot, in view of these distractions, agree to teach them to read at grade level.

The only way I can agree, in a moral sense, to make some attempt to be accountable for the actions of persons who are not fully under my control is if those persons are presented to me with all negative conditions removed. And since there is no way of insuring that children will walk into our public schools only under optimal conditions for learning, it seems I cannot *morally* agree to be accountable, in this narrow legal sense, for the learning of my students.

So is there some means of insuring ourselves of the guarantee which the notion of accountability was originally introduced to provide--the guarantee that children will *in fact* learn something specific? In view of the qualifications I have, in logic, been constrained to make, I think not. But this conclusion does not all mean--I hasten to add--that we have to give up on the hope of being able to educate our children more effectively than we've been doing up to now.

ACCOUNTABILITY AND THE CONGRESSMAN

I want to say that, speaking as a legislator, I sympathize with your problems of dealing with accountability in your school systems. We in Congress are familiar with the demand for accountability. As representatives of our constituents, we are accountable to them in at least two senses. First, they may call us to account for actions we have promised to undertake if they elect us. And second, they may call us to account for actions we do take when we propose bills, vote yes or no on certain bills, hold hearings, and vote to expend money or not to.

But we in Congress know about accountability from the other side of the fence as well. For one of our essential duties as legislators is to assure that the executive branch is carrying out the intent of Congress in accordance with the terms of specific legislation. For example, the President says that we can't solve social problems by throwing great sums of money at them. And one of our difficulties in responding to this unexceptional truism is there are few effective ways of judging the effects of educational expenditures. In fact, we haven't *yet* developed adequate standards of performance for human behavior of most sorts, let alone for the behavior specific to the education setting.

IN SUMMARY

It is time for me to summarize what I have tried to tell you. I have argued, first, that we must begin to construe accountability as a two-way relationship between and among all participants at all levels of the educational process. And I have said that this approach makes unnecessary the tendency to use accountability as a way of pointing a punishing finger at someone, particularly at teachers. This way of understanding accountability can mean a new sense of democratic relationships throughout the entire chain of administration-faculty-pupil-and parents.

Second, I suggest that it is essential that we begin to develop scientifically acceptable standards for judging educational performance. That is one reason I support the National Institute of Education as well as other serious research on this subject, however financed.

And, finally, I indicate how legislators too recognize the problem of accountability as far more than an abstract idea.

For Congressmen and Senators who write legislation that affects the schools and universities of this nation, accountability must be a continuing concern. I know that for all you who shape the process of teaching and learning it will be a continuing concern as well.

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